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ABSTRACT

Much of the story of illiteracy is about the powerless, and reporting on it can focus on who lacks power and why. However, much of the untold story about illiteracy is about people with power who are choosing not to wield it--educators, economists, elected officials, presidential candidates, corporate leaders, publishers, and the literate public at large--in support of changing poverty-related illiteracy. Reporting on illiteracy and other poverty issues requires immersion, context, and repetition. The first step in reporting on illiteracy is defining the problem and isolating its causes. It requires asking why and making connections. Finally, good reporting on illiteracy requires comparisons that get attention, objectivity, and the search for tidal facts, the facts that illuminate the essential truths of the situation. (KC)

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REPORTING ON LITERACY:

SOFT-SELLING A COMPLEX POLITICAL STORY

By Michael Moss

For the Media Resource Project of the Education Writers Association and the Institute for Educational Leadership with a grant from the MacArthur Foundation

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The Education Writers Association, founded in 1947, is the professional association of education reporters and writers. Its project on resources about literacy was established to help journalists cover the issue of illiteracy/literacy in ways that reflect the complexities and far-reaching implications of the issue. This paper is one of several being commissioned during 1988 that deal with specific facets of literacy and was first presented on April 16, 1988, at the EWA National Seminar in New Orleans, Louisiana. Others analyze the relationships of the literacy levels of young adults to their newspaper reading habits, the coverage of literacy/education in the current presidential campaign and math literacy in the United States. EWA maintains a clearinghouse of resources about literacy and publishes the monthly The Literacy Beat. The staff is prepared to help writers make contacts or otherwise obtain ideas and information about the issue of literacy. Please contact Lisa Walker, executive director, or Anne Lewis, consultant, at 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 429- 9680.

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By Michael Moss

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MICHAEL MOSS presently is assigned to cover the politics and social policy implications of Manhattan real estate development for New York Newsday. For 1986-87, he was a Fellow at the Gannett Center for Media Studies/Columbia University, researching coverage of the poor. A summary of that research appeared in the July/August issue of the Columbia Journalism Review. Moss previously worked for two Cox newspapers, the *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* and the *Daily Sentinel* in Grand Junction, Colo. He began his journalism career as an environmental reporter in California and Colorado. Among his special assignments have been coverage of a 1983 Mount Everest Expedition and of H'mong refugees in Thailand, both for Cox Newspapers. A native of California, Moss received awards for his reporting from the press associations in both Georgia and Colorado. He also is a long-distance runner, completing 24 marathons, including races at Pikes Peak and Boston.

REPORTING ON LITERACY:

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A stream of cars accelerated up Madison Avenue in Manhattan as Bill Moyers, the journalist, flagged a yellow cab. It cut right to the curb and stopped. He climbed into the sagging back seat.

He had just come from a press conference at the tony Municipal Art Society, where he joined other citizens-turned- activists in launching a campaign to defeat a proposed skyscraper. The double-tower building was poised to go up at Columbus Circle, from where it would throw two new shadows into Central Park--columns of darkness that, in the winer months when light is most precious, would reach clear across to Fifth Avenue.

The campaign turned into a battle royale, gathering headlines in all four New York dailies through the autumn and early winter. It became a good story, in part, because it was lush with elements: money, politics, secret loans, children in the park. But more importantly, it was a story about those who had power in New York. The cast included the brash Mayor Edward I. Koch, whose city stood to gain $400 million for selling the land; the young and single Fortune 400'er Mortimer Zuckerman, publisher and estate developer; the baby-faced Abraham Biderman, Koch's finance commissioner and numbers man who negotiated the sale and was then thrown out front to fend off criticism; and the Art Society coalition, whose membership boasted a slew of power brokers, from Isaac Asimov to Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Moyers made a long and eloquent plea for minimalism that morning at the Art Society press conference. But it was riding across Midtown to his office on the West Side that he spoke most plainly about the matter from a journalist's perspective. Moyers was asked how he would approach the Columbus Circle towers story, and, more broadly, the chaos and boom of real estate that was creating a Brave New Manhattan. He mulled for a moment, and then said, "I think you have to tell it in terms of power. Who has it. How they got it. How they wield it."

There could be no better approach to covering illiteracy in America, particularly when the plight of those who can't read or write stems from the fact that they're poor.

Much of the illiteracy story is about the powerless, of course. And the requisite telling is in terms of the absence of power. Who lacks it, why they never got it or how they lost it, and how its absence affects their lives.

But much of the untold story about illiteracy is about people with power who, for the most part, are not choosing to wield it—educators, economists, elected officials, presidential candidates, corporate leaders, publishers, the literate public at large. They hold the keys to real change, and the probing we reporters could do much more of involves placing poverty-related illiteracy into the context of why they are not wielding their power.

It's only in terms of power that much about illiteracy and the world of the disenfranchsed and powerless can be told. And it's only in terms of power that we can expose the paths to solving what's become part of America's economic disgrace.

My interest in how the media covers poverty stems from my own reporting, which has ranged from covering environmental issues in California, to the energy boom and bust cycles in the Rocky Mountains, to the contrast between the rich and the poor in the South. I recently spent a year as a fellow at the Columbia University Gannett Center for Media Studies, where I researched and wrote on the media's coverage of poverty in general. From my own work I mostly learned how not to do it. From several hundered interviews with other journalists, poverty specialists, and the poor themselves, I maybe learned how to.

In reviewing this year's entries to the Education Writers Association contest, "The Best of the Literacy Beat," and other reporting on illiteracy, I've discovered some striking parallels between the way we cover illiteracy and the way we cover other aspects of poverty. Indeed, in a reporting sense, homelessness is to housing what illiteracy is to education—a simpler to tell, anecdotal fragment of the broader, more complex issue. The lack of both housing and education, in turn, stems from the even

broader and political issue of how and why society permits the disenfranchisement of so many of its members. This paper explores some ways to convert fragmentary and anecdotal reporting into news stories that cut deeper.

The Three Ingredients

Before we're able to reach such depth, which requires telling the story in terms of power, there are three basic ingredients that need to be stirred into our recipe for reporting on illiteracy and all other poverty issues—immersion, context and repetition. They may seem like standard tools in good reporting on everything we cover, from local transportation to the presidential elections. But because good poverty reporting requires extraordinary commitment and time, they tend to get slighted or entirely overlooked when we turn to the poor.

Immersion

The first ingredient, immersion, requires us to dive into the world of people who, because they're poor, can't read or write. That means spending enough time with them, in their homes, at their work, with their circle of friends, to begin understanding how poverty shapes their lives.

Although journalism about illiteracy hasn't produced the rich library of classics as has reporting on poverty in general, there are some lessons about immersion to be gleaned from some turn-of-the-century book-length reports on poverty. They were based on first-hand lengthy investigations, from cross-country journeys tracking the jobless stream, to months spent posing as a factory worker to expose exploitation.

One of the better journalists at immersion was Jacob Riis, a Danish immigrant who, after years of crime reporting for the *New York Tribune*, wrote in 1890 the famed book, How the Other Half Lives.

It's in his autobiography, The Making of an American, that Riis explains his deliberate effort to slip into the city's other half.

It was his commute home from work that opened his eyes to the tenement slums. He walked home. Slowly. Between two and four o'clock in the morning. And, he wrote, "I saw the slum when off its guard. The instinct to pose is as strong there as it is on Fifth Avenue. We all like to be thought well of by our fellows. But at 3 a.m., the veneering is off and you see the true grain of a thing."

Of course, authors, as well as the larger news companies with deeper pockets, can afford the time and expense of immersion. One of the better recent examples was a series on teenage mothers that Leon Dash reported for *The Washington Post*, a runner-up in last year's Pulitzer prizes. Dash spent 18 months getting to know several of these families in a Washington neighborhood, finding that as time went on they began changing their stories from their initial public facades to a more honest accounting.

The efforts of some reporters at smaller papers deserve equal acclaim. Fred Brown's recent series on poverty in Appalachia for the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, for example, shows what a reporter can do with even a few weeks time. His portraits come alive, without gushing or the veneer Riis warns about. Importantly, however, Brown was raised in the country he writes so well of. For most others, visiting an Appalachian hollow for less than a few months or years and hoping to come away with anything of depth is just an editor's delusion.

The *Lexington* (Kentucky) *Herald-Leader* also showed that giving a reporter time—in its case, six weeks—is essential to producing the kind of depth it achieved with its series on illiteracy that ran last year. The profiles come alive, especially that of 59-year-old Rachel Burns, the eldest of nine children, born to an illiterate farmer, and wife to a man who couldn't sign his name. The magic of such profiles is that even though the subjects have problems different from those of the readers, the readers are introduced to people they can understand and with whom they can share common bonds—bonds like hope and fear, ambition and hesitancy. The quality profiles done by the *Herald-Leader* go far toward wiping out the "us and them" distancing

that we all tend to do as an escape from responsibility toward one another.

Many of the Literacy Beat entries had good profiles. However, they were almost exclusively about people closest to us—working- or middle-class people whose lack of literacy was almost surprising given all they were able to achieve without reading or writing. None, unless I missed them, delved into the extremes of poverty and the places in America that resemble Third World countries for their utter lack of industry and social fabric and hope.

Experts are uncertain about what percentage of poverty as a whole is taken up by the hard-core, multi-generational poor, compared with people living at or just below the poverty line. The number of drastically poor may be fewer, but their impact on social welfare programs and other aspects of society may be proportionately greater. And few papers or broadcasters have made the extraordinary commitment of resources to reach into that world.

Context

The second ingredient to better reporting is placing illiteracy in the context of poverty, which, in turn, we need to place in the context of America's wealth. That requires us to sharpen our sense for the irony, and our analytical skills in drawing connections and in explaining the separations that keep classes apart.

Plugging context into the 1,500-word news story is no easy feat. Indeed, it could be the toughest challenge. It's certainly the most glaring fault in our coverage of all poverty issues, believes Robert McNeil of the PBS NewsHour, who spoke in a recent interview about his and other news media coverage of poverty. "We're not bad on the microcosmic examples—the displaced steel workers, farmers growing broke, the urban and elderly poor, single teenage mothers. These are all profiles that are in the American mind," he said. "But what is not in the American mind is what an overall, amazing failure of this society's promises that having so many millions of Americans living in poverty

represents, and what it says to the Soviet Union and others about our own attention to basic human rights."

But often it merely requires reporters and editors to step back a minute and draw ever widening circles around the story they're trying to tell until the full scope comes crystal clear. That's what took place in *The Sacramento Bee*'s three-part series on illiteracy that ran last November. The lead: "One of every six adults in California can barely read."

Several sentences later, they unloaded one key explanation: "According to an in-depth study by the *Bee* on test results and educational research, public schools in this state are failing to educate as many as one out of three students." And then, forming the fifth paragraph, the kicker: "The devastating cycle of illiteracy goes on and the price for it is high. California spends more than $6 billion a year on its welfare system. More than 50 percent of all welfare clients, according to a recent state survey, couldn't read or write well enough to be trained for a job."

Although the *Bee* series is a scathing indictment of merely one of the more obvious explanations for adult illiteracy, bad education, it shows how putting the story into the context of tax money expenditures can pull in even the reluctant reader.

Perseverance

And thirdly, we need to refrain from the single take-out or series approach to covering illiteracy and poverty. Call it crusading, or merely perseverance. But publishers and broadcasters need to plug coverage of poverty into the same equation they use for more established beats like sports and the arts and even education.

Most of the Literacy Beat entries appeared to be single shots—stories that an editor or publisher ordered up one day, reporters produced soon after, and readers forgot soon after that.

The other day I asked Fred Friendly, who produced Edward Murrow's famed documentary on migrant workers, "Harvest of

Shame," what he would do differently in a remake. And he answered, "Nothing, really, except I'd show it over and over and over again, because that's the only way you can make an impression on people."

Examples of crusading journalism are rare today. The only example I could find in my research at the Gannett Center occurred four years ago when the editors of the Nashville *Tennesseean* decided to force the issue of low welfare payments onto the state's legislative agenda, and to do so they ordered up a run of almost daily stories that went on for weeks—until the legislature agreed to consider the issue, raised the payments and forced the governor to reverse his stance and sign the legislation.

I have since learned of another example. Two education reporters for the *Clarion-Ledger* at Jackson, Miss., won both the Grand Prize for Distinguished Education Reporting and the Pulitzer Prize for their 1982 almost-daily coverage of the state's education problems. The barrage of stories, based on an intensive statewide investigation, influenced the legislature to approve major education reforms.

The most innovative approach to perseverance in illiteracy reporting has been done by the Philadelphia *Daily News*, which in 1986 began a thrice-weekly column of easy-to-read features based on current news stories. Called the "Savvy Reader," it's written for adults who read on a 4th, 5th or 6th-grade level. Managing Editor Tom Livingston, the *Daily News* wrote in explaining the column, "felt the paper needed to do more than just cover the literacy issue, or lend corporate support to programs."

But there's a need, too, for papers to keep the issue of illiteracy alive by producing explanatory news stories on a regular basis.

How to Begin

The very first step to reporting literacy, of course, is defining the problem and isolating its causes. Just as people don't have

homes for several main reasons, there are several broad explanations for why people did not or could not learn to read and write. "Illiterates? Dyslexics? Learning-disabled or, in some cases, functionally retarded?" Amy E. Schwartz, a *Washington Post* editorial writer, asked in a December 1986 column headlined, "The Individual Mystery of Illiteracy."

"If you hang around enough, you find people use labels very indiscriminately," Schwartz quoted a literacy program administrator as saying, going on to write that the program's individual tailoring "helps explain, for a visitor, why the drive for literacy hasn't caught political fire; it's just too complicated once you get up close."

Schwartz goes on to argue that the problem of illiteracy is far too complex for inexpert government policymakers to grapple with. "The best thing politicians can do may be to stay perplexed, and stay back," she wrote.

But Schwartz is right only in the narrow sense of keeping politicians out of the classroom. She's wrong in the broader sense of who should understand and have a clear role in fighting illiteracy. Not only do elected officials who have their hands on education budgets need to understand why our schools produce people who can't read and write, every person of political influence needs to understand why our economic system is producing people who weren't allowed to learn how to read or write.

Telling the illiteracy story in such terms of power is a difficult task. But one key is clear: the finest, hardest- hitting reporting is good because the reporter took the time to name names. One of the best was Paul Du Brul, a laborer's son who first fought for a ban on lead paint after discovering children were dying from nibbling on peeling apartment walls, and then in the early 1970s co-authored a book entitled *The Permanent Government*, which detailed the world of New York City's powerful, and thus went far to explain why so many in that city are powerless.

Another namer of names was Nick Kotz, a *Des Moines Register* and then *Washington Post* reporter who followed

Robert F. Kennedy into Mississippi and then wrote Let Them Eat Promises, a book that more than fulfilled its own introductory promise. "This story concerns the politics of hunger in affluent America. It is the story of how some leaders left their air-conditioned sanctuaries, discovered hunger among the poor, and determined to make it into a national issue; of other men who knew about hunger but lied; of still others who learned about hunger but voted for fiscal economy at the expense of the hungry poor."

U.S. Rep. Mickey Leland, chairman of the Select Committee on Hunger, wrote to me after I cited Kotz' piece as the standard with which to measure all other hunger-related news stories and urged reporters to explore the science and politics of hunger, rather than indulge in the more typical anecdotal accounts of hungry individuals ("The Poverty Story," Columbia Journalism Review, July/August 1987). "Portraying the human dimension of hunger is essential to maintaining a consciousness of hunger among the general public," Leland wrote. "We need both stories with a human focus and those that probe the specifics of hunger's origins and results. We need to expand coverage, not diminish it."

Maybe. One entry in the Literacy Beat contest by the New York *Daily News* Sunday magazine was an especially good look at one person's experience in one illiterate adult program. Titled "Yes I C-A-N" and subtitled "There are 1.5 million functionally illiterate adults in New York. Minus one," the piece led off with an appropriately succinct declaration: "Class in session."

Such fine reporting about programs that work is essential, and I think we're doing a fairly good job when we try. But the vast majority of news reporting on aspects of poverty, including illiteracy, is so merely human interest and anecdotal that the political result of such reporting leaves the public focused on the poor—or illiterate—themselves. That focus has varied in flavor from time to time in the past century, from being critical of the disenfranchised in blaming them for their plight, to being sympathetic with them in feeling sorry for their condition, and feeling perhaps charitable. Our making victims of the illiterate only fuels their lack of self-respect. As with poverty in general,

a boost in self-esteem likely would be one of the first results of empowering the illiterate with the knowledge that they're not wholly to blame for their condition.

What seldom is conveyed to media consumers is that there are very real causes to illiteracy, as there are to all types of poverty. And those causes can only be traced and reported by journalists with the commitment of a Kotz. I would argue with the Select Committee chairman that a misinformed public—in this case, led to think that explanations of illiteracy lay with the illiterate—is worse than an underinformed public. And that the bits of private charity stemming from reporting that elicits sympathy subverts the type of aid that would bring lasting change—government assistance in the short-term, and policy shifts in the long.

Asking Why

Much of the reporting on illiteracy that I've reviewed for this paper seems to be looking at things: at the men and women who can't read or write; at the people teaching them; sometimes, too, at the news companies sponsoring such literacy programs. We're interviewing people without homes and those who can't read or write. But we're largely missing the people who are responsible for both plights—educators, politicians, business leaders, and possibly the public at large itself.

What they're not telling me is just how those people came to be adults in America without becoming literate. Only the *Sacramento Bee* entry in this year's Education Writers Association contest, The Best of the Literacy Beat, carefully traced an illiterate high school graduate back through the system. But the remarkable entry did so painstakingly, interviewing the teachers and administrators with tough, hard questions and quoting their sometimes shameful, but always insightful answers. The entry thus tore into the fabric of public school education to show why the illiterate student was graduated.

And that's just one glimpse at the underlying causes. Only the more obvious cause of illiteracy stems from the education

system, just as the more obvious cause of homelessness stems in housing programs and in the lack of public funds or private initiative for new construction and restoration. Also, a certain number of the homeless are mentally ill, just as some illiterates are mentally incapable. But a far more significant problem is that both illiterates and the homeless have been shoved outside the economic stream—the boy who was pulled from school at age eight to work in the fields; the ghetto girl who was never allowed to go to school; the children who had no homes in which to do homework; the illiterate athlete for whom it was deemed unnecessary to read or write.

Making Connections

After the causes are exposed, the truly hard work of drawing connections must be made. We have to show in our stories what politicians are saying about illiteracy and what they're really doing through legislation and budget-crafting. We have to show how our evolving minimum-wage employment scene and service economy are influencing literacy. We have to show how the corporate world influences public and private education and the economic role they do or should take. At best, now, we seem content with throwaway lines about the "high economic cost" of illiteracy to corporations and the government. Those costs, with a lot of work, can be finely documented for a much more dramatic and meaningful effect.

And then we have to take a hard look at the literacy- fighting programs to see what works, what doesn't.

Also, we need to examine more closely the statistics on illiteracy in America. I'm not sure readers necessarily believe the experts when they say one in six or one in seven adults are illiterate. The ranges I've read are as great as the estimated ranges of homeless in America, or of vacant apartments in New York City, or of the new housing New York Gov. Mario Cuomo says he's creating. Most times merely challenging the alleged numbers is to expose serious faults in the calculations. If newspapers can spend huge sums taking meaningless political

polls, then they can spend money doing their own surveys and sampling census taking to find out for ourselves whether the experts are right.

Comparisons That Get Attention

We then need to take those numbers and compare them to Third World countries, where illiteracy is the most basic definition of underdevelopment. As in infant mortality, I would guess America has slipped far down the ranking, even below many First and Third World countries like Nicaragua or the People's Republic of China where defeating illiteracy was made a priority campaign by new governments. There couldn't be a more grabbing lead than, "Costa Ricans now out read Americans two to one, according to a comparative study by...."

Illiteracy reporting that has depth and perseverance and takes a political tack requires special commitment from media companies. We need that commitment, especially because it's in the self-interest of newspapers to fight for the education of potential subscribers.

Media as Message or Messenger?

But there's a new movement that calls for papers or even the networks to involve themselves directly in literacy campaigns, and I believe that's wrong for the same reason it's wrong for newspapers to get directly involved in any charitable campaign: It poses a conflict of interest, and puts editors and reporters in the inhibitive position of criticizing their employer.

If fighting illiteracy were a straightforward matter, there would be no problem—and no need for news reporting about the comparative value and success of various approaches. But the fact is that the experts are debating that very question: how best to solve illiteracy? And if the media chooses sides by choosing to support one or another method, few reporters are so bold, or so reckless with their careers, as to challenge their own publisher.

Far better for media companies to spend money on producing the best possible reporting, which will influence public opinion and policy, than to spend a few dollars trying to do the job themselves.

Looking for Tidal Facts

Perhaps the best inspiration I've found for reporting on the underlying causes of disenfranchisement in America comes from a little known book published in the 1950s—The Airtight Cage: A Study of New York's West Side, by Joseph Lyford. This passage alone explains the intangible nature of the political understanding that can be gained from good reporting:

"The most important facts about the city are what I call tidal facts," Lyford wrote. These tidal facts illuminate the invisible voluntary processes that are part of the character and the physical body of the city, processes analogous to breathing or the beating of the heart.

"When I say tidal facts give essential truth, I am comparing them to facts about institutions like churches or the Department of Real Estate or what officials say about themselves. I gathered a lot of data about such institutions and people and the best that I can say about the information is that it provides a few helpful clues. The trouble is that one of the functions of a political or social institution—and of some people—is the manufacture of lies about itself and its environment.

"Although tidal facts cannot be counted or heard and have no color or particular shape, there is no mistaking one of them when you come across it. Tidal facts appear or they reveal themselves; they are not collected. This discovery of a tidal fact is inadvertent, sometimes, and at other times it appears in a very distinct, bloblike shape after a great deal of lying awake and worrying about where the truth is. You find a rip or a hole in the surface of life and suddenly you are looking into things, not at them."

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